

# **“I use half Nepali, half English, the hybrid language!” - translinguaging for pedagogy in a Nepali literacy class**

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## **Abstract**

This paper will discuss the pragmatic use of translinguaging as a pedagogical practice within a Nepali literacy class setting. Translinguaging, a term first used in Wales in the 1980's by Williams and Baker to describe a pedagogical practice for teaching two languages together (Lewis et al., 2012), has developed to describe a process in which

both languages are used in a dynamic and functionally integrated manner to organise and mediate mental processes in understanding, speaking, literacy, and, not least, learning. Translinguaging concerns... function rather than form, cognitive activity, as well as language production

(Lewis et al., 2012: 641).

Translinguaging therefore, as a 'flexible bilingual pedagogy' (Blackledge and Creese, 2010), has been seen to offer 'learners the possibility of accessing academic content with the semiotic resources they bring, while acquiring new ones' (Garcia and Wei, 2014: 66). Translinguaging is identified by the Nepalese teacher in this study as a valuable tool in her pedagogical toolkit.

The example of translinguaging discussed in this paper is taken from ethnographic data gathered over one academic year as part of a PhD study of multilingual literacy learning of Nepalese children growing up in the UK. Participants are Nepalese Nepali speaking children and their teacher.

## **Introduction**

The main focus of this paper is the pragmatic use of translinguaging as a pedagogical tool within a community Nepali literacy class. The paper begins with an introduction to the community and its Nepali literacy class. The paper then discusses the development of the term 'translinguaging' before considering its use within this

class setting. The final section returns to the term 'hybrid' before offering some conclusions.

### **The Nepalese Community in the UK**

The Nepalese community in the UK have been closely connected with the British Army for over 200 years (Trust, 2014). The Nepalese population in England and Wales at the last census was 60,202 (Statistics, 2011). The Nepalese community in which this research has taken place has a population of several hundred and their Nepalese society meet together to celebrate annual festivals and other special occasions.

A Nepali literacy class runs every Saturday morning during term time for children within the community. Teachers are volunteers and often, but not always, parents of children in the class. Teaching is differentiated at three levels, beginner, intermediate and advanced. The majority of teaching takes place in one room. Over the year of research, the class has been regularly attended by a core group of nine children aged 7-13, with other children coming less regularly.

Within the community, education is of primary importance. Children attend mainstream schools during the week and some take private tuition alongside their studies as well as extra-curricular activities, such as brownies, swimming, music and dance tuition (both Western and Nepalese). In most cases, Nepali language and culture are strongly maintained within the community, but literacy is maintained to different levels depending on family decisions.

As a trained teacher, the researcher has taken a participant observer role within the class. Ethnographic data has been gathered through observations, field notes, audio recordings, copies of the children's work, photos and interviews.

### **Translanguaging: an overview of its origins and development**

Translanguaging is a term that was used in the 1980s by Cen Williams and Colin Baker to describe a pedagogical practice used in Wales for using two languages together in the same lesson: input (reading/ and or listening) tending to be in one language, and output (speaking and/ or writing) in the other language (Baker, 2011, Lewis et al., 2012). Translanguaging continues to be an important feature of Welsh

education (Baker, 2011) but is also a concept explored by a number of scholars working in a variety of different educational contexts (e.g. Blackledge and Creese, 2010, Creese and Blackledge, 2010, Creese et al., 2011 in complementary schools, Garcia, 2009 in US highschools, Garcia and Wei, 2014, Garcia, 2011, Hornberger and Link, 2012, Garcia, 2013, Canagarajah, 2011 in US University classrooms).

Translanguaging refers to the complex language practices of many bilingual people as well as 'pedagogical approaches that use those complex practices' (Garcia and Wei, 2014: 20). Within education, translanguaging can be seen as a reaction against the monolingual bias that has so long been the primary focus of language lessons in the West, particularly in Britain and North America (Garcia, 2013). Research in complementary schools in the United Kingdom identified these schools as safe, multilingual spaces which employed translanguaging as a flexible bilingual pedagogy in which 'two or more languages' were 'used alongside each other' (Creese and Blackledge, 2010: 103). Canagarajah (2011) defined translanguaging as the 'ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system' (Canagarajah, 2011: 401) and Gutiérrez et al. (1999) referred to these practices as 'hybrid'. The hybrid theme will be discussed later.

This paper takes the view that the concept of translanguaging is more than code-switching or shuttling between two separate languages (Garcia and Wei, 2014: 22). Garcia explains

Translanguaging posits that bilinguals have *one linguistic repertoire* from which they select features *strategically* to communicate effectively. That is, translanguaging takes as its starting point the *language practices of bilingual people as the norm*, and not the language of monolinguals, as described by traditional usage books and grammars (Garcia, 2011: 1).

The term 'repertoire' is associated with the work of Gumperz (1964) who used the term 'verbal repertoire'. Gumperz, with reference to a particular speech community, explained that verbal repertoire

contains all the accepted ways of formulating messages. It provides weapons of everyday communication. Speakers choose among this arsenal in accordance with the meanings they wish to convey (Gumperz, 1964: 138).

The concept of repertoire is extended by different scholars (e.g. Garcia, 2011, Blommaert, 2008, Wei, 2011, Busch, 2012, Otsuji and Pennycook, 2010). Blommaert (2008) explains that a ‘polyglot repertoire’ is ‘tied to an individual’s life’ and that it follows the ‘peculiar biographical trajectory of the speaker’ (Blommaert, 2008: 16). The importance of biography is echoed by Wei who discusses the way certain social spaces in communities create opportunities for translanguaging and the fact that translanguaging itself can create these spaces. Translanguaging for the multilingual language user brings ‘together different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity’ (Wei, 2011: 1223).

The paper will now present and discuss a transcript from the research data.

### **An example of translanguaging within the Nepali literacy class**

The following extract documents interaction between the Nepalese teacher (Sundari) and six girls aged 7-12 in the intermediate group at the Nepali literacy class. The children are sitting around a table. Sundari has given each child some Nepali grapheme flash cards and the extract begins with her asking them to pick up their card and say the sound.

Nepali uses Devanagari script which is an alphasyllabary (a writing system in which consonant vowel sequences are written as a unit (Singh and Rao, 2014)). Learning the correct grapheme phoneme correspondence for these units is a prerequisite to reading and writing Nepali words. The single sound “a” (as in **ago**, **around**) is the inherent vowel which is used with a basic consonant symbol (Wagley and Rauniyar, 2012, Matthews, 1998). This inherent vowel is written as a single “a” in the transcript below. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Key:	( )	information to aid understanding
	< >	translation
	<“ ”>	transliteration of Nepali sounds
	#	transcribed words are uncertain
	###	unclear

... pause

Name audio muted

1. Sundari: Er, let's start from this side. ल <okay> Pick up your first card and tell me what it is.
2. Sanjana: र <"ra">
3. Maya: ह <"ha">
4. Sundari: show that to everybody हो? <yes?> के हो यो? <what is this?>
5. Children: र <"ra">
6. Sundari: okay... (mumbling) हो। यो के हो? <it is. What is this?>
7. Children: प <"pa">
8. Sundari: ~~Maya~~
9. Maya and others: प, प <"pa, pa"> (said with some vocal aspiration)
10. Sundari: प <"pa"> (emphasising the sound clearly), okay ~~Pratibha~~
11. Pratibha: ट <"Ta">
12. Sundari: हो? <yes?> सबैजनालाई ट भन्छ एलाई? <Everyone is this called "Ta"?>
13. Children: ट ट <"Ta" "Ta">
14. Sundari: हो, ट हो? ट बाट एउटा word भन मलाई < yes, is it "Ta"? tell me a word starting with "Ta">  
English word भने पनि हुन्छ <even if you say an English word it is okay>
15. Madhu: #tar
16. Maya: tall
17. Sundari: okay, next one
18. Maya: ह <"ha"> (the card has क्ष <"ksha">)
19. Sanju: no (whispered)
20. Sundari: सबैजनालाई हर्छ, ~~Maya~~ को cardमा <"everyone look at ~~Maya's~~ card">
21. Sanju and others: क्ष <"ksha"> क्ष <"ksha">
22. Sundari: So ~~Maya~~ ले त लाई ह भन्दै छ, त्यो ह हो? <so ~~Maya~~ is saying "ha" for that, is that "ha"?>
23. Children: क्ष क्ष क्ष क्ष <"ksha" "ksha" "ksha" "ksha">
24. Sundari: okay ~~Sanjana~~
25. Sanjana: क <"ka"> (the card has फ <"pha">)
26. Kalpana: no फ फ <"pha" "pha">
27. Sanjana: this is क <"ka"> (spoken confidently)
28. Kalpana: yeah but I did okay! (laughing)
29. Sundari: तिमिले front बाट हेदैथ्यौ? अगाडिबाट हेदैथ्यौ? <were you looking from the front? Were you looking from the front?>
30. Sanjana: अँ <yes>

31. Sundari: हो? <yes?> तिमिले पछाडि बाट हेरेको त, भनेको हो <you looked from the back, you said this>
32. Sanjana: yes (whispered)
33. Sundari: हो <yes> so क पछाडि हेरदाखेरा ल look, के difference छ? <looking from the back of “ka” what is the difference?> (holds up फ <“pha”> and क <“ka”> cards)
34. Kalpana: that, that one’s like, like a zero
35. Children: ###
36. Sundari: यि दुईतैमा, के difference छ? <in these two, what is the difference?>
37. Madhu: that is zero
38. Kalpana: that is zero छ <has>
39. Madhu: like a circle
40. Sundari: क र फ मा different छ नि, होइन? < as for “ka” and “pha” they are different, are they not?> पछाडि हेरदाखेरा < looking from the back> you were quite er confident (laughter)
41. Sundari: क भने but यो फ हो <you said “ka” but this is “pha”> okay! यो के हो त? <what is it then?>
42. Children: क फ <“ka”> <“pha”> (mixture of both sounds)
43. Sundari: सबैजनाले? < everyone?>
44. All: फ <“pha”>
45. Sundari: फ भन्छ एलाई, फ बाट एउटा word < this is called “pha” what is a word starting with “pha”>
46. Madhu: फ<“pha”> #far
47. Children: ###
48. Kalpana: fall
49. Sundari: Humpty Dumpty had a \_\_\_\_\_? (waiting for a response)
50. Maya: fall
51. Madhu: great fall!
52. Sundari: (signals to the next child to say their sound)
53. Children: (laughter)
54. Kalpana: त्र <“tra”>
55. Madhu: ख <“kha”>
56. Sundari: You’re not quick enough!
57. Children: (laughter)

### Transcript discussion

There are four points to highlight in response to this extract. The first is the use of translanguaging throughout the transcript. Both the teacher and the children draw on different resources from their linguistic repertoire in order to explain and

communicate. Because the teacher permits the children to answer in English (line 14), the children default to English unless saying the Nepali sounds. The children's responses demonstrate their understanding of both English and Nepali and where there is opportunity some children choose to speak Nepali. In line 38 for instance, Kalpana adds the Nepali word छ (meaning 'it has') to the end of her sentence, adding emphasis to her English statement 'that is zero'. It is possible she has been reminded of the word छ by the teacher in line 33 above and this is still in her mind as she answers Sundari's question. Sanjana's multilingual repertoire is evidenced in lines 30-32, as she speaks the word 'yes' in both Nepali and English and understands a third word for yes, line 31-32. The teacher and the children are drawing from their wider multilingual repertoire in order to communicate at a mutually comfortable and appropriate level.

The second point to highlight is the very deliberate choice of words in line 29 as a pedagogic intervention: translation. Translation belongs within the broader concept of translanguaging. Sanjana has confused the sounds क <"ka"> and फ <"pha"> so the teacher repeats the question 'were you looking from the front?' using the Nepali word for front. It seems that translation is used in this case to promote understanding. Baker proposes that translanguaging can be used for a number of reasons, one being to 'promote a deeper and fuller understanding of the subject matter' (Baker, 2011: 289). Baker later explains that in a class setting where the children may be learning their language, children may translanguage naturally but 'it may be engineered by the teacher' (Baker, 2011: 291). This implies a deliberate, pragmatic choice of words by the teacher to promote the children's understanding and learning. In the interview conducted with the teacher, she makes a distinction between translating and 'mixing English with the Nepali...the hybrid language';

Sundari: I think in my head which one, which one they will find easier and then use that, like if I think in my head that perhaps translating is much easier for them, they will understand and grasp it by translating I use that. Otherwise I use half Nepali, half English, the hybrid language.

(interview , July 2015)

From the emic perspective of the teacher, translation is something deliberate and pragmatic because she thinks about it 'in her head'. However, the 'hybrid' language is something she uses more generally.

The third point to highlight is the use of English words and phrases to teach the Nepali sounds, thus scaffolding the children's learning. Baker suggests this use of the stronger language may help the development of the weaker (Nepali) language (Baker, 2011). Children respond in lines 14 -16 with 'tall' for त <"Ta">, and in lines 46-50, 'far' or 'fall' for फ <"pha">. Picking up the word 'fall' from Kalpana in line 48, Sundari draws on her own repertoire and selects 'Humpty Dumpty', an English nursery rhyme to reinforce the word 'fall' and its relation to the Nepali grapheme फ <"pha">. This reference to a nursery rhyme could be seen as two fold; firstly it is an English resource the children are likely to know and therefore one that could help them make a memorable connection between the word 'fall' and फ <"pha">. Secondly, reference to a nursery rhyme, implies that in the same way young children know and remember nursery rhymes, these children should know and remember the Nepali sounds. A significant part of the lesson has been spent trying to learn the फ <"pha"> sound and in line 52, Sundari gestures for the next child to say their sound. The children respond quickly, but she jokes they 'are not quick enough'. The teacher's comment suggests again that the children should already know these sounds.

The fourth point to highlight relates to the different abilities of the children within this group. Baker posits translanguaging may help the integration of fluent speakers with early learners (Baker, 2011). There are times in the extract when children comment on each other's performance. This happens first in line 19, where Sanju whispers 'no' in response to Maya's comment that the grapheme ह is <"ha">. Maya was incorrect and Sanju's engagement in the lesson and the relaxed atmosphere makes it possible for Sanju to comment, albeit quietly. The second time this peer response is observed is between Kalpana and Sanjana in lines 25 – 28. Kalpana correctly believes that Sanjana has made a mistake and that the फ grapheme is pronounced <"pha"> not <"ka">. Sanjana however is so sure the grapheme is <"ka"> that Kalpana retracts her confident correction, laughing 'yeah but I did okay!'. The



teacher then intervenes to help all the children learn the correct grapheme phoneme correspondence. Although the children are being taught at the same level, it is apparent some are more confident than others and the relaxed atmosphere means that it is possible for the children to learn from each other and from their teacher who is a more fluent speaker. Garcia confirms the positive influence peers can have in the learning process;

By using ...multilingual partners, translanguaging extends and deepens the thinking of students...[it] simply has the potential to expand thinking and understanding (Garcia, 2011: 2).

### **‘The hybrid language’**

The paper now returns to Sundari’s comments, ‘I use half Nepali, half English, the hybrid language’. Sundari is talking in an interview about her choice to mix the English with the Nepali or to translate. Sundari explains that her decision is based on which one the children will find easier. Sometimes Sundari deliberately chooses to translate a word or phrase, but the default in this class context is the hybrid language: translanguaging. From an emic perspective, Sundari’s background in biology might explain her use of the words ‘mixing’ and ‘hybrid’. Using ‘the hybrid language’, scaffolds learning for the children at the same time as acknowledging their personal histories, experiences and the environment they are part of (Wei, 2011).

Sundari’s use of the word ‘hybrid’ as the default literacy practice in this setting, appears to build upon the ‘principled, purposeful and organised mixing’ (Hornberger, 2003: 258) described by Gutiérrez and colleagues who refer to ‘hybrid language practices... [as] not simply code-switching as the alternation between two language codes. They are more a systematic, strategic, affiliative, and sense-making process among those who share the code, as they strive to achieve mutual understanding’ (Gutiérrez et al., 1999: 88).

### **Conclusion**

Translanguaging as discussed in this paper is seen as an overarching concept that embraces multilingual repertoires. Translanguaging recognises the many choices and ranges of expression, linguistic knowledge as well as cultural understanding

available to multilingual individuals (Garcia, 2009). In the extract discussed, translanguaging has been identified as an essential tool in a Nepalese Nepali teacher's pedagogical toolkit. Garcia writes

Translanguaging is a pedagogical strategy that should be used to build on bilingual students' strengths, to help them use language and literacy in more academic ways, to pose challenging material, to notice differences in language, and to develop bilingual voices (Garcia, 2011: 3).

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**Biography**

Sarah Knee is a full time doctoral research scholarship student in the School of Education, University of Birmingham. Her research interests relate to pedagogical practices in schools and multilingual communities. She has taught in UK schools and was principal of an international school for expatriate children in Nepal.

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